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ABSTRACT

Many methods in clinical and personality psychology has as their implicit if not explicit aim the eliciting of transformations so that the mind of the subject may be better understood. By offering a graduate seminar in "Psychobiography and Historiometry," the author hoped to deal with the problem of design and transformation in the study of life and literature. Since transformations are in some sense unconscious, a mental leap must occur for the transformation to be made. Furthermore, it is suggested that the transformational process is at the heart of the creative process. Toward further investigating the creative process, the seminar attempted a psychological portrait of William Carlos Williams. Through the use of clay sculpture, the class was able to create diverse structural representations of a selfhood they had found in the writings of the poet. (LL)

THE TRANSFORMATION OF PERSONAL THEMAS IN LITERARY CREATION

Prepared for delivery as a paper in 1973 American Psychological Association Symposium (*Henry A. Murray at 80*)

By

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There are some who say that a title should be the final act of resolution of something that is being written. You don't really know the name of what you're doing until you've brought the doing of it almost to the end, or even a bit thereafter. There may be a surprise in store for you, the creator of the piece. Why name a baby before it's born?

Well, one reason is that the chairperson of an APA symposium will insist on a title before there's even a gleam in the author's eye. Many a monster has been fabricated a week before the symposium, or even a day before, to fit the rashly announced name for something whose origins and dimly conceived outline by that time could hardly be recollected. It's so easy to forget what one had in mind.

In spite of this preamble, I am not about to disown my title. When I let Ed Shneidman have it, I did have something definite in mind, and I remember it clearly. I intended to analyze interview and T.A.T. material from the study of creative writers at the Institite of Personality Assessment and Research some years ago, and to relate the material to what they had written and what they have written since.

This I still intend to do, but not today. For when I sat down to consider my topic, and when I read all the T.A.T. stories told by the writers in my sample, I was forced to the realization that I could not tell a personal thema from a literary thema. Let me elaborate.

Responses to the Thematic Apperception Test are easily enough understood as literary creations, though clinical custom in the 1940's and 1950's was to treat them as "projections," presumably unconscious, of underlying thematic realities in the person's life. Even granting the notion of unconscious motivation, and believe me I do grant it, this was a questionable assumption, since a test respondent might very well elect consciously to tell a story about something that was bothering him in real life and that he wanted the clinic to know about. To make it easier for them, he might even arrange some slight transformations that would pique the clinician's imagination and curiosity.

The thought first came to me in 1946 when as a graduate student newly returned from World War II I was offered a posh V.A. clinical internship in the

University of Minnesota clinical psychology program and was put to work giving Wechslers, Rorschachs, T.A.T.'s and of course for sure one other test at the V.A. Clinic in Fort Snelling. My first professional crisis came soon after. Intrigued by the similarity of a patient's T.A.T. story to certain aspects of Freud's use of the misfortunes of the house of Iaius as a cornerstone of theory, I asked the patient what *he* would think of his story if he were a psychologist like me. "Oh," the patient replied, "It's all about me and my sister and how my father fixed my gate when he found out." I then proceeded to get him to interpret his whole record for me, and indeed he did about as good a job as my supervisor did the next day. My mistake, of course, was to tell the supervisor afterwards instead of before. Well, we all had authority problems in those days, although these seem not to be fashionable anymore. Who would dare to be an authority nowadays?

But disposing of the problem of unconscious sources in at least some cases only leads to a more interesting question. All transformations are in some sense unconscious. A leap must occur for the transformation to be made. This is at the heart of the creative process, whether the transformation is from conscious thought to conscious thought or from unconscious to conscious, or, for that matter, from conscious to unconscious. Why should we not have *creative* repression, condensation, displacement, substitution and projection? There is no reason why a neurosis cannot be elegant, if other fictions can.

I have tried to study this transformation process in several ways, and of course many methods in clinical and personality psychology have as their implicit if not explicit aim the eliciting of transformations so that the mind of the subject may be better understood. A bit later I shall speak of some of the methods in my own research, but first let me return to my statement that the distinction between a personal thema and a literary thema is not all that clear.

In a sense, we are all stories. All too often we are stories made up by other people more than by ourselves. Yet even the most modest and gentlest of us makes up part of his *own* story. A writer is someone who goes a step further and makes up a story about making up a story. Dramatic reality is relative. As great Goethe expressed the reflexive character of personal and literary creations, "I did not make my songs, my songs made me." Yeats has it that "mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show." Neitzsche said, "Reality is complexly reflexive." We begin by telling a story to ourselves about ourselves, and some of our stories we enact. Fate and accident may enter to provide our material, but it is we who do the concoting. The apperceptive mass is a creation, whether it finds expression and enactment or not, and whether or not the expression is "literary" or "real."

I must suppose it no accident that Cambridge, Massachusetts, has bred generations of hardnosed realists who have been entranced by the most radical forms of subjective idealism. Listen to Emerson, who got a hall named after him at Harvard:

> If the red slayer think he slays
> Or if the slain think he is slain
> They know not well the subtle ways
> I keep, and pass, and turn again.

they say, is but a dream; and even dreams are dreams." Now I am quoting Calderon, the great Spanish dramatist of the 16th century, words from his *La Vida es Sueno*. Suppose you are studying lives, not dreams. Is there anything to be learned for the study of lives from the study of dreams?

I ask this in all seriousness, not to give the answer in a minute. I must be a bit rueful about this, for I have lately, like yesterday, been appointed head of a new institution at the University of California, Santa Cruz, bearing the name *Laboratory for the Psychological Study of Lives*. It owes its inspiration, its existence, to Harry Murray, and I would be willing to give him all the credit and none of the blame for what it may do and produce. But of course no one else will let him off that easy, since he started all this stuff about thematic apperception and the radix; and his own work, from embryology to psychology, has been animated by the notion that life is like a flowering, a beginning and growing and transmitting and falling back again, a part of the great cosmic process of creation in which the design of the whole thing may be discerned, however dimly.

That view of design and transformation is the basic perspective that I hope our new Laboratory may hold to, whatever the fit may be of our means to the scope of that vision.

By a happy accident, or perhaps it was not an accident, the very first project that my students and I undertook for the new Laboratory brought us squarely into the middle of the problem of design and transformation in the study of both life and literature. It began with my offering a graduate seminar this past quarter in "Psychobiography and historiometry," with a promise that theory would be worked out and put to the test through a specific application. I went into the seminar with two ideas of my own for applied study: 1) a psychohistorical reconstruction of the major personages of World War II and their relations to one another and to the events and outcome of the war; and 2) a study of five Irish literary figures, from Joyce to Yeats with three O's in the middle (O'Connor, O'Casey, and O'Faolain), and their interrelations as well as their bearing upon the contemporary situation in Ireland. To my surprise, the first idea was met with total lack of interest on the part of my students. To most of them, World War II was something that had happened before they were born. What is so engrossing to me was the irrelevant past to them. The second idea met with only a little more interest. Hardly any of the students had read any of the authors mentioned except Joyce, and contemporary Ireland was as remote as World War II. The gap of which I sometimes become aware between me and my students yawned wide. Yawned was not too strong a word. We ended the first meeting with the question of a specific application still open, and fully half the class dropped the course before the next meeting began.

But the worst was still to come, it seemed. One of my reasons for suggesting the Irish study was that two of those five writers, Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor, had taken part in my study of creative writers some sixteen years earlier. I had some vague notion that if the students wrote psychobiographies of those writers and attempted Q-Sort and Adjective Check List descriptions of the "implied author" based on the writings alone, I could study the question of how life themas are transformed in literature and how the writer creates the implied or mythical author in his writings. It now occurred to me that perhaps

what I had been suggesting was too ambitious, and that we might do better to take a single author as subject and to leave history out of it. This idea sounded much better to the class. After further palaver, we settled upon William Carlos Williams as the writer of choice, for various reasons which I shall not go into now but which did not include any suspicion that his work itself exemplified the very problems in design and transformation that the seminar must needs address in order to advance theory and perhaps devise new methods in the study of lives.

What are those problems? I see three that I consider basic: 1) the recognition of similarity and the development of a metric for establishing degree of similarity; 2) the establishment of criteria for growth of forms, that is to say, for recognition of one form as proceeding from an earlier form in which it may be said to have been immanent; and 3) the sequential relationship of static forms to one another in such a fashion that *time* and *space* can be taken into account as dimensions of the total design. One of the design features of man I listed in my Division 10 address last year, "The Design of Man and Its Implication for Consciousness," is that *we are a process in time*. This presents a difficulty in the representation of lives that I think psychology has not yet attempted to confront, though the fact of the matter was vividly enough stated by William James in the *Principles* in his description of the stream of consciousness. Some of the great poets and novelists in this century, however, have consciously accepted the problem and tackled it with artistic means: I think especially of Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Rilke in the *Orpheus* cycle, Joyce in *Ulysses* and in *Finnegan's Wake*, Pound throughout his poetical work, Virginia Woolf in *The Waves*, Yeats once again in *Rosa Alchemica*, in many of his poems, and in at least one of his plays (*Words Upon the Windowpane*), and, finally, the great Italian film director Federico Fellini, who in spite of the vast difference in imagistic content between his work and that of the Irish poet is startingly similar to him in his formal pre-occupations.

I have omitted music and sculpture, under which I include creative architecture, from this list of the arts that consciously take on the problem, but it should be apparent that for these oldest of the arts the problem has always been a central one, and purely conceived at that. The very definition of design given in Webster's *Unabridged Dictionary* includes the musical sense of the term: "in music, the disposition of every part and the general order of the whole." Certainly there are musical compositions in which through the sequence of sounds a universe is created which seems to have spatial, structural qualities so that we may speak of architectonics in music.

Life, in brief, is not only a story; it is also a musical and architectural composition. Themes are introduced, vanish for a time, recur with increasing complexity, sometimes monotonously, sometimes with promise of novel development, organize themselves into a structure, propel themselves and the structure into and through space, aim towards a climax. The whole may come off well or badly, grand opera or merely soap opera, but the changes of form through time suggest structural realization with esthetic properties.

The William Carlos Williams seminar did, as it happens, come off extremely well, due largely to the fascinating material of Williams' published work. We

undertook as a class to read all his writings, and we read much of his poetry aloud in class, including most although not all of *Paterson*. In the last few weeks of the seminar, the students undertook, individually, to do several psychological tests as though they were Williams himself. Some students wrote poems to him or about him, another wrote a play with Williams as a character in it, still another did a symbolic painting of Williams. But the most interesting exercise from the present point of view is one we all attempted with the use of clay, imagining ourselves *to be* William Carlos Williams attempting to make a clay sculpture that should symbolically represent *himself*. When we had finished, we opened our eyes and began comparing clay sculptures and mental notes. We found many interesting correspondences in the three-dimensional forms we had created. One recurring theme was "the secret enclosure"--not emptiness inside, but a hidden space. Still another was the use of boundaries to wall off scenes or activities from one another, not in the service of secrecy but of separateness. A third recurring theme had to do with sexual ambivalence or perhaps hermaphroditism expressed morphically--male and female genitals in a single structure, or symbolic equivalents of male and female forms in dynamic relationship to one another. Several of us provided for waterways or enclosures for water.

These themes have meaning in another context, and I shall attempt to consider them in a psychological portrait of Williams to which I am committed. For the present purpose, I think it sufficient to note that we are able to create diverse structural representations of a selfhood that we had found in the writings of the poet.

It was not until a few weeks after the conclusion of the seminar and indeed after I had formulated the main ideas of this paper that I came upon the following remarkably apposite critical analysis of Williams. We had arrived in the seminar at similar ideas in considering Williams as person, but had not articulated them as important to the literary problem of form that he had set himself to solve.

> Of all Williams' poetry, *Paterson* is the best illustration of his concept of design and of his reliance on figurative speech; not only is the entire poem a single metaphor, but it also depends for much of its structure on symbolic and transitional metaphors. The epic itself was, of course, responsible for Williams' new concern with structure; its length and diversity forced him to find a flexible design, and in so doing, to leave one of his former artistic beliefs--that of chronology as organizational principle. Faced with the complexity of the man-city-river-art which *Paterson* is, Williams realized that "consecutiveness" might well be secondary. He turned instead to a spatial arrangement which he described in 1945 as putting "designs" of color on a blank wall, "moving about . . . until at the end the meaning would be totally revealed." That he saw metaphor as the means of approaching such design is evident in his comment that "one extended metaphor freely handled" would allow the poet "SPACE, within the metaphor, to maneuver, to move about at will."
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> *Paterson* is consequently the complete expression of Williams' extended-metaphor technique. The "design" of the poem comprises the poet's intimate interpretations of life, made concrete through images,

> scenes, events, and characters--all elements juxtaposed without conventional time sequence, and, for the most part, without transitions. Williams provides what coherence is necessary through transitional and symbolic metaphors connecting the sharply defined images, all now arranged in a type of theme-and-variation structure. . . .[1]

I might remark as an aside that in this preoccupation Williams was a generation ahead of his time. The "identity crisis" was most fashionable in the 1950's, but the 1960's saw the emergence of what I shall lightly call the "location crisis." The question "Who am I?" became "Where am I?", and we began talking about *where* so and so was *at* rather than who he thought he was. An unhappy person was "in a bad place" and someone who was nowhere "real" at all was "spaced out." The adventurous souls were moving into new spaces, not new identities. This is an important, radical change in conception of the self and of mind in general.

In this very hasty survey of problems I cannot examine in any detail the question of symbolic equivalence of forms and the development of a metric for establishing degree of similarity and of difference in complexity and organization. Those of you who are interested in seeing the approach I am taking may find a description of it in a recent book of which I am main co-author, *Artists in the Making*, in the section on a test for symbolic equivalences. Basically what I do is to suggest to the test respondent a stimulus image, verbally and sometimes figurally, and ask him to produce something symbolically equivalent. Degree, aptness, and originality of the suggested equivalent can be discerned and rated quite reliably by trained raters, and the technique is adaptable to a forced choice as well as free response format.

My hope is that psychobiography may be revitalized by the application of methods developed for such other purposes as empathy training, gestalt art therapy and dream interpretation, and education for creative thinking; with emphasis on synectics and on exercises for increasing symbolic scope. The new Laboratory for the Psychological Study of Lives will soon be publishing examples of such applications.

Since my interest in the work of William Butler Yeats is no secret, it should also surprise no one that I recently conducted still another seminar devoted entirely to Yeats. In this seminar we attempted in detail to relate the poet's life to his work. I find reassurance and validation of this enterprise in Yeats's own words, in a lecture entitled "Friends of My Youth":

> I have no sympathy with the mid-Victorian thought to which Tennyson gave his support, that a poet's life concerns nobody but himself. A poet is by the very nature of things a man who lives with entire sincerity, or rather the better his poetry the more sincere his life; his life is an experiment in living and those that come after have a right to know it. Above all it is necessary that the lyric poet's life should be known that we should

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[1] "The Poems of William Carlos Williams: a Critical Study" by Linda Welshimer Wagner. Published by Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 1963.

understand that his poetry is no rootless flower but the speech of a man.

I mention the Yeats seminar partly because it illustrates what I think is an important methodological point which perhaps I did not stress sufficiently in the Williams seminar. The students and I undertook to read the *Collected Poems* aloud and in the sequence in which they appear in the volume, a sequence that for the most part reproduces the actual order in which the poems are written. As one 19-year-old student remarked at the end in evaluating the seminar, "It was an astonishing experience to see a man grow to maturity and grow old week by week before your very eyes. It got me away from thinking young all the time." This reality between the covers of a book came to life because we held to temporal sequence in the poet's experience and creative work, and perhaps too because we witnessed the events in common as a seminar. We were all more or less in the same place at the same time, that is to say, we were in the same space-time. This means a lot, not just pedagogically (who doesn't know that a classroom can have multitudes of spaces?) but in terms of consensual validation of the results of the empathic process in each of us there present. We felt close to one another afterwards, even though we knew one another only through our mutual friend Yeats.

I have no intention of ending with banalities about the space-time neighborhood in which we are all gathered together to greet again our mutual friend Harry Murray at 80, but after all we are part of the same psychic stirp and there is a genetic relationship of minds as compelling in nature as the genetic template system for engendering similarity. We are a sort of family of minds. So, in keeping with my theme, I would like to end with a story, and a house with several stories, and a street, and something about the weather, and a remembrance which I can't claim is entirely accurate though I'll say it's true, of my first meeting with our friend.

Very early in 1956, either at the very end of January or in the first days of February, I flew by airplane to Boston from the West Coast. I began in San Francisco, but I thought to take a two-day holiday in Las Vegas, a primitive gambling spa in those days. Win if you can, was the song the roulette wheels were singing. I considered the carpentry and wondered whether an unsuspected warp in the chiseled wheel might favor the observant. Win if you can goes better with the clickety-clack of train wheels on the rails, but I went by air. In the plane I dreamt and dreamt as we flew over midwestern turbulences. I woke to storms more than once, but the dreams were connected, whether the air was calm or stormy. Later I wrote them into the beginning of a story: "The Sacred Mushroom in Harvard Yard."

That story actually is of a later day, and I pass it by for now. I stayed at the Commodore Hotel in Cambridge that night and I was glad to be snug in that ancient hostelry because a blizzard hit overnight and when I awoke in the morning it was showing heavily and the whole earth seemed covered with snow and captured by frigid high winds. After a local sort of breakfast I put myself together in my old winter overcoat and plunged into the storm. It was hard going, now into the wind, now askant, occasionally helped along by a gale that was right on to 48 Mount Auburn Street, the location of the annex of Harvard Psychological Clinic. As I began to arrive there, peering ahead of me in the

confounding storm and fully feeling the great cold of the place, I discerned in the distance a dim figure struggling alone as I was in the face or faces of the storm. We approached one another through a distance of about one hundred yards, solitary together in the wind and snow that had made a private place at that time of morning in Mount Auburn Street. I got to the door of Number 48 a few steps before my companion did, and I was peering up to try to find the number when he arrived. He turned out to be the gentleman of whom we speak today, but all I knew then was that his salutation struck me as odd.

"Well, you're here!" were his first words. Then came the usual exchanges, and we went inside and he called Bob White to say I had arrived, and there was some talk of the hero from California, which I took to be a simple commentary on the Cambridge winter and no exaggeration at all, and finally without further ado a long conversation about freedom and necessity and what it means when the path of A crosses the path of B, and so on into my first memorable day at the Baleen, for that was where we were.